

UNSTABLE CONNECTIONS: CHALLENGES & STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOLS



**Wendy Kinnear, Regional Coordinator, Pennsylvania's
Education for Children & Youth Experiencing
Homelessness Program**

Pennsylvania's Regional Model

Region 5: 10 counties, 68 school districts, 23 shelters, 4 Intermediate Units

2,797 children & youth experiencing homelessness in 2018-2019

Where were they?

1,808 Doubled-up, 433 Shelter, 132 Hotels/Motels, 47 Unsheltered

In Pennsylvania: 39,221 students were identified as experiencing homelessness in 2018-2019

In Northwestern PA:

Approximately 70% of students identified as experiencing homelessness are living in "doubled-up" situations.

23% are "unaccompanied youth."

There were approximately 3,000 additional students in the Foster Care system in Region 5 in 2018-2019

HOW DID THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC ADD TO THIS?



In many rural Northwestern Pennsylvania districts (10 county area, 68 school districts): 50-60% of students were reported to not have internet options or access

40-50% of households did not have a tech device, even more did not have enough for all students in the home

Families were unable to travel to pick up meals/tech/resources

Lack of hygiene items, lack of masks, thermometers, sanitizer

Unstable housing and unsafe housing environments

Students dropped off the radar and stopped logging in



Since the pandemic: 7 out of 10 teens are struggling with **mental health** in some way:

55% anxiety

45% stress

43% depression (Pew Research 2020)

3 months of education has been lost for students engaged in virtual learning

Drop out rates have increased (McKinsey, 2020)

- Student reports of **bullying** has increased in PA by 30% (www.healio.com)
- 155 children have died in PA this year from **child abuse**, an increase from last year, but reports are declining (www.msn.com)
- There has been a significant uptick in **domestic violence** cases in PA (www.wearecentralpa.com)
- **Statewide eviction** protections have ended, although CDC moratorium continues until the end of 2020. Housing advocates predict that there will be a surge in evictions beginning January 2021 (<https://legalfaq.org>)

Identifying Students During Building Closures

01

Embed information about homelessness in school outreach information

02

Ensure that online information and enrollment has information and resources

03

Make the contact information for the district Homeless Liaison prominent in any communications

04

Be aware that economic stress, domestic violence and other factors may increase numbers

Warning signs:

- Be aware of students and/or parents being unreachable for extended periods of time
- Difficulties participating in scheduled class times
- Difficulty completing assignments



Look for signs of homelessness when doing distance learning:



- Frequent background/location changes
- Many different people in the background beyond immediate family members
- Motel/hotel
- Public areas (park, library, coffee house, etc.)
- Unwilling to turn on camera
- Inconsistent internet connections

Who Is Responsible for Identification?



- Every local educational agency (LEA) must designate an appropriate liaison for both Homeless and Foster Care.
- First duty of the liaison: "Ensure that homeless children and youths are identified by school personnel through outreach and coordination activities with other entities and agencies."
- This gives liaisons both the responsibility and the authority to identify McKinney-Vento students and determine eligibility.
- Monthly data reporting is required.
- Empathy?
- Collaboration skills?
- Time?

CHALLENGES FOR RURAL SCHOOLS

Hidden Homelessness

Families reluctant to self-identify

Refusal of services, supports

“Poverty is relative”

“We take care of our own”

Stigma

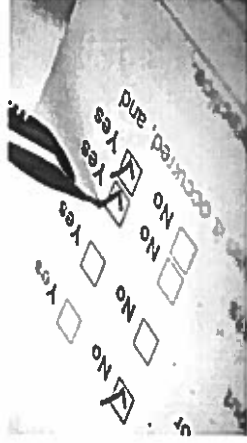
Transportation barriers

Substandard living situations normalized



ASSESSMENT

- Survey families as soon as possible about anticipated needs
- Embed information related to available supports and services on website and in any take-home materials
- Welfare checks and home visits when possible
- Survey families periodically to determine situational changes and to screen for possible homeless situations



CREATIVE SOLUTIONS: TECH



- Repurposed laptops purchased and donated to students
- New tech purchased with McKinney-Vento grant funds to loan to districts for distribution
- Mobile hotspots on school buses drove throughout districts
- Hotspots purchased and provided for students in homes
- Hotspots designated at community points (fire stations, schools, granges, churches) - students accessed from parking lots

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS: MEALS



- Buses delivered food
- Staff hand delivered food to remote areas
- Multiple distribution points throughout community
- Donations from community restaurants, food pantries and churches to supplement school lunches
- Students experiencing homelessness received backpacks with food for weekends
- For highly mobile families, several days worth of food was distributed at once
- Referral to free meals (Sheetz, Burger King, etc.)
- Districts shared responsibilities

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS: HYGIENE



- Deliver hygiene items, thermometers, basic cleaning supplies to those in need along with food
- Donations from local service groups
- Handmade masks donated by church members
- Reminders to wash hands, how to clean surfaces, warning signs of COVID-19, etc. embedded in informational materials
- Online training modules, provide links in website or through email Example: Vector Safety Training

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS: LEARNING

- For students unable to access internet, paper instructional packets were provided and prepared by essential staff
- Virtual STEAM summer camps offered to all children in shelter across Region plus physical supplies at each site
- Community centers such as libraries and churches offered space for small group learning or tutoring pods
- Weekly check-ins with highly mobile students
- “Game nights” at school buildings
- Lending library



TIPS FOR FORMATTING ONLINE LEARNING

- Do not require cameras to be on
- Provide longer time frames for assignment completion
- Remember that not everyone has a safe, quiet place to learn; reliable internet; electricity or a “nice” home
- Provide earbuds to minimize background noise
- Offer videotaped lessons that can be viewed at any time
- Consider prioritizing high risk students for classroom learning if permitted
- Be flexible!



LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT CHALLENGES

- Grading:
 - Pass/Fail
 - Traditional letter grades



- Begin with end in mind:
 - What do you want students to learn?
 - How are you going to gather evidence of learning?
 - What lessons and activities will effectively lead to learning?

- **Note: Pre-COVID assessments depended on student's physical presence in class. Now? Are kids absorbing what is being taught?**

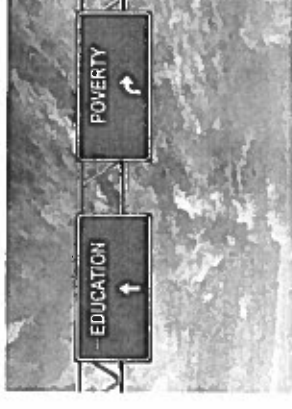
ORDER OF OPERATIONS

- Student relationships and wellness
 - Physical
 - Mental
 - Emotional
- Learning
- Assessment
 - Don't lose site of priorities
 - Be open to new ways of assessing, be flexible



DIVERSITY OF STUDENT'S SITUATIONS AND EQUITY

- Access to technology
- Access to internet
- Socioeconomic status
- Time to access and complete classwork
- Parent/family support
- Safe space to do work
- Language learners/special needs
- Computer usage skills (keyboard skills, familiarity, apps)



NOTE: Districts cannot discriminate against students with challenges

ASYNCHRONOUS ASSESSMENTS

- Teacher and students separated by space and time
- Completing activities, assignments, projects
- Answering questions

NOTE: Asynchronous methods should be given priority to students having varying degrees of challenges/access

Assessments should be valid, timely, child-specific. Move away from memorization and towards application of knowledge to new situations

“I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, but what I do I understand.”

REMINDER

If you are a mandated reporter, you are still obligated to report any suspected child abuse:

- Unexplained injuries
- Extreme substandard housing situations
- Student who “disappear” and are not logged in, not able to be reached by phone or visits

CHILDLINE: 1-800-932-0313



IDENTIFICATION STRATEGIES



- Do not use the word “homeless”
- Provide forms to allow self-identification, such as a checklist or on-line survey, use for online enrollment!
- Train all staff in district. Everyone - from teachers to bus drivers to front office staff need to understand:
 - McKinney-Vento definitions. Remember that most people do not know about things like “substandard housing” and “doubled up” as a definition of homelessness
 - Unaccompanied Youth
 - Basic components of the law and the rights of students experiencing homelessness

IDENTIFICATION STRATEGIES

- Partner with your community:
 - Hang posters and flyers in campgrounds, motels, food pantries, laundromats, Wal-Marts, Med Express offices and other community places where families in poverty might congregate
 - Work with local housing groups and shelters. Attend local housing and social services meetings. Most are being conducted by zoom.
 - Remember law enforcement, juvenile probation and Children and Youth Services.
 - Highlight partnerships, donations and collaborative efforts on your district webpage and social media sites.



IDENTIFICATION STRATEGIES



- Communicate with youth where they are. Expand social media presence to provide outreach Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter and other platforms are good ways to do outreach in your communities.
- Word of mouth. Other students and district parents can share information.
- Scheduled awareness days and activities (Red Shirt Day in Pennsylvania, Virtual art shows, etc.)
- “Open gym” days and community days

REGION 5 SUPPORTS:

Region 5 Staff can provide:

Training and staff development

Regional Workshops

Technical Assistance and guidance

School uniforms, clothing, supplies

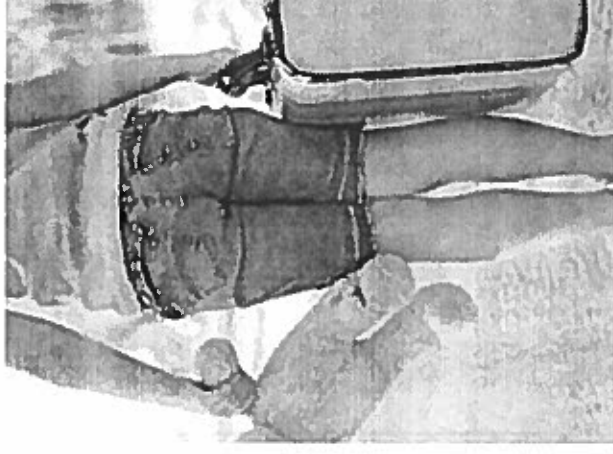
Referrals for services

Mediation with disputes

Attendance at BiD meetings

Summer enrichment, tutoring, virtual camps

Technology purchased (iPads) and available to loan to students in Foster Care through the MIU IV office



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Wendy Kinnear

Regional Coordinator, Region 5

Education for Children & Youth Experiencing Homelessness &

Educational Stability for Youth in Foster Care Programs

Midwestern Intermediate Unit IV

Lawrence County Career & Technical Center

750 Phelps Way

New Castle PA 16101

Cell: 724/730-4859

Email: wendy.kinnear@miu4.org

